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Higher Fees, Higher Debts: Unequal Graduate Transitions in England?

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Abstract

This chapter draws on findings from a comparative, qualitative research project that investigated the decision-making of different groups of English higher education students in central England as they graduated from a Russell group university (46 interviewees) and a Post-92 university (28 interviewees). Half of the students graduated in 2014 (lower tuition fees regime) and the other half graduated in 2015 (higher tuition fees regime). The students interviewed were sampled by socio-economic background, gender, degree subject/discipline and secondary school type. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore students' future plans and perceptions of their future job prospects. Despite higher debt levels, the 2015 sample of Russell Group graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds had a positive view of their labour market prospects and a high proportion had achieved either a graduate job or a place on a postgraduate course prior to graduation. This group had saved money whilst studying. The 2015 sample of Post-1992 University graduates (from both lower *and* average socio-economic backgrounds) were worried about their level of debt, future finances and labour market prospects. This chapter raises questions about whether a fairer university finance system, involving lower levels of debt for graduates from less advantaged backgrounds, might avoid some graduates' transitions to adulthood being so strongly influenced by financial anxieties.

Key Words: student finance; student debt; higher education tuition fees; graduate transitions; graduate inequality.

Introduction

The global financial crisis (GFC) of 2008 contributed to conditions for precarious socio-economic life. This means that young adults face declining full-time employment opportunities, and increasing competition in employment, where possessing qualifications alone loses out to experience (Howie and Campbell, 2016; Holdsworth, 2015). Such precarious employment situations have coincided with increasing costs of debt-based forms of higher education payment, as the cost of higher education has shifted from the state to the

individual. As discussed in Chapter 1 of this book, the ongoing period of post-crash austerity coincided with the trebling of tuition fees in England in 2012 and the abolition of the means-tested grant in 2016. Kelly (2015: 58) suggests that in response to neo-liberal hardships, young adults are expected to become 'rational, autonomous, choice making, risk aware, prudential, responsible and enterprising'. However, in relation to higher education there should be a concern that this places responsibility for 'graduate success' on the individual, which risks creating 'deserving winners' and 'undeserving losers' of higher education.

Although graduates continue to have better job prospects than non-graduates on average, the graduate premium has declined over time and some degrees lead to much more lucrative jobs than others. Roberts et al. (2016: 321) discuss the nature of graduate trajectories with reference to the work of Beck (1992) who describes a post-traditional age in which:

'predictable or 'normal' trajectories are disrupted, to be replaced by 'do-it-yourself' biographies: responsibility is thrown onto the individual to achieve 'self-realisation', including making decisions about career, leisure and education.'

As Arundel and Ronald (2015) note, transitions to adulthood are a key period for individual development, but also contribute to processes of social stratification. Transition dynamics today are characterised by increased complexity, postponement, diversity and individualisation. This means there is precarity in transition pathways, for example the rise of 'yo-yo' and 'boomerang' transitions, which leads to uncertainty reshaping routes to adulthood.

Abraham's research (2016) suggests that the growth in university participation may not lead to a reduction in social inequality, since there is growing inequality in graduate outcomes. She points to the HE sector being increasingly stratified and argues that those students from non-traditional HE backgrounds remain less likely to study at Russell Group universities, which may impact on these individuals' future employability. As Reay (1998: 1) warned, students must be wary of the 'myth of meritocracy' because it 'normalises inequalities, converting them into individual rather than collective responsibilities'.

The chapter now turns to the findings of a recent research project which identified different perceptions of graduate transitions by students at different types of university.

Research methods

This chapter draws on data from a two-year qualitative research project examining final year students' views of their future labour market and financial

prospects. The research contrasts the perceptions of students graduating in 2014, who left university with much lower levels of debt than those graduating in 2015, the first cohort to leave university after the trebling of fees in 2012 (see Vigurs et al., 2016a; Vigurs et al., 2016b for further discussion of the study). We explored students' decision-making processes and perceptions of job prospects whilst they were in their final semester of their undergraduate studies. Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with students (*n*74) at two different universities in central England (46 studied at a Russell Group University and 28 studied at a Post-1992 University). Russell Group universities are characterised as research-intensive and have high entry requirements. Post-1992 universities refer to institutions that were former polytechnics and were only accorded university status in 1992. Many post-1992 universities have lower entry requirements and recruit a greater number of students from non-traditional HE backgrounds.

The students interviewed in 2014 (*n*37) were selected by socio-economic background, gender, degree subject/discipline and secondary school type. This sample was matched in 2015 with another 37 final year students using the same criteria (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Participant sample by year, institution, background and discipline

Institution	Sample criteria	No. of 2014 participants	No. of 2015 participants
Russell Group HEI	Lower SE background / STEM	7	7
	Higher SE background / STEM	6	6
	Lower SE background / Humanities	7	7
	Higher SE background / Humanities	3	3
Post-1992 HEI	Lower SE background / STEM	2	2
	Higher SE background / STEM	4	4
	Lower SE background / Humanities	2	2
	Higher SE background / Humanities	6	6
Total Participants		RG = 23 Post-92 = 14 2014 Total = 37	RG = 23 Post-92 = 14 2015 Total = 37

The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and were conducted by one member of the research team. In addition to the stratified sampling approach outlined in Table 1, all participants were required to meet the following criteria:

- Final year of a full-time, 3 year undergraduate programme;
- Studying either a STEM subject or an arts/humanities subject;
- Aged between 20 and 23.

Informed consent was gained from participants via a project information sheet and a consent form which was signed before the interview was arranged. Student participants were each given a £15 voucher to spend online to thank them for their participation. Previous projects have shown that such incentives are necessary to ensure participation from targeted students. In order to ensure the anonymity of the student participants, pseudonyms have been allocated in this chapter. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and then coded thematically.

Comparing graduand perspectives across the 2014 and 2015 sample

Tables 2 and 3 below presents a comparison of the total sample by year. We compared the sample on the following issues:

1. Were the students able to build up financial savings whilst at university?
2. Did they access professional work experience whilst at university?
3. Did they experience anxiety about entering the graduate labour market?
4. Had they secured a graduate employment post prior to graduating?
5. Were they actively seeking non-graduate employment post-graduation?
6. Were they planning to study a post-graduate qualification straight after graduation?

At first glance, a comparison of numbers by year against the above categories does not appear significantly different. In fact in some instances positive responses appear to have increased in 2015 (e.g. more students declared saving money whilst at university and more had secured a graduate job). At face value this might suggest that the introduction of the 2012 student finance reform in England had little impact in terms of students' graduate decision-making and their perceptions of their graduate futures.

Table 2: Comparing graduand views across 2014 and 2015

	No. of 2014 graduands (n37)	No. of 2015 graduands (n37)	Difference
1. Students who saved money whilst studying	5	6	> 1
2. Students who undertook professional work experience whilst at university	15	12	< 3
3. Students who declared having anxiety about gaining graduate employment	21	22	> 1
4. Students who had secured graduate employment prior to graduation	6	7	> 1
5. Students who were actively seeking non-	18	18	0

graduate employment after graduation			
6. Students who would be studying a postgraduate qualification after graduation	6	6	0

Some interesting patterns emerge when comparing 2015 graduates with 2014 graduates. The sample of students at the Post-1992 HEI who were from lower socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to have taken part in professional work experience and more likely to have been seeking non-graduate employment after graduation. None of this group had saved money, secured graduate employment or chosen to go on to post-graduate study in either the 2014 or 2015 sample. The sample of students at the Post-1992 HEI but from higher socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to be anxious about entering the graduate labour market, more likely to be seeking non-graduate employment and less likely to be planning to go on to postgraduate study straightaway. The sample of students at the Russell Group university who were from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to have built up savings while studying, more likely to be planning to go straight on to postgraduate study and fewer seeking non-graduate employment. The sample of students from higher socio-economic backgrounds who were studying at the Russell Group University were less likely to have saved money while studying but more likely to have undertaken professional work experience and fewer were seeking non-graduate employment.

Table 3: Graduand views by year, HEI and socio-economic background

Students by HEI type & SE background		Saved money at uni	Professional work experience	Graduate employment anxiety	Secured graduate employment	Seeking non-graduate employment	PG study after graduation
Post-92 lower SE background n8	2014	0/4	3/4	3/4	0/4	2/4	0/4
	2015	0/4	1/4	3/4	0/4	4/4	0/4
Post-92 higher SE background n20	2014	1/10	2/10	6/10	1/10	4/10	3/10
	2015	0/10	2/10	8/10	1/10	6/10	1/10
Russell Group lower SE background n28	2014	2/14	6/14	6/14	4/14	7/14	2/14
	2015	6/14	3/14	6/14	4/14	5/14	4/14
Russell Group higher SE background n18	2014	2/9	4/9	6/9	1/9	5/9	1/9
	2015	0/9	6/9	5/9	2/9	3/9	1/9
2014 Total		5/37	15/37	21/37	6/37	18/37	6/37
2015 Total		6/37	12/37	22/37	7/37	18/37	6/37

This finer-grained, comparative analysis of the sample starts to suggest that some groups were experiencing more positive graduate outcomes and transitions than others. For example, it appears that the 2015 students at the

Russell Group HEI who were from lower socio-economic backgrounds had the most positive outcomes of all students in the sample. It also appears that the 2015 students at the Post-1992 HEI, noticeably from both categories of socio-economic background, had the least positive outcomes in the total sample.

The ‘winners’? Graduating students from lower socio-economic backgrounds at the Russell Group University in 2015

This study found that the sample of 2015 graduands from lower socio-economic backgrounds at the Russell Group University reported the most positive graduate transitions and outcomes

They were able to build financial savings during study

The six students from lower SE backgrounds at the Russell Group University were the only group in the 2015 sample to have accrued financial savings whilst at university. For example, Max and Rachika shared that they had been able to ‘live comfortably’ and ‘save up’ whilst being students, which meant that they felt confident about committing financially to postgraduate study.

Similarly, Martyn used his savings to create a financial and psychological safety net, which meant he felt confident about negotiating the transition to graduate status, negating the need to rush into low paid employment for financial reasons.

“I am comfortable with my financial situation. Obviously I planned financially to leave university and I’ve got six months’ worth of money saved for my bills before I start worrying.” (Martyn, BSc Hons)

This group of students were unable to rely on their family for financial support. However, they were eligible for non-repayable student finance on an annual basis comprising the full maintenance grant of £3387 (which has since been abolished) and a generous institutional bursary (approximately £3000) as well as being able to access a repayable student loan for living costs. A number of them also had part-time jobs and/or paid employment over the holidays and most of them lived at home whilst studying. This mix and amount of financial support, particularly in the form of institutional and government welfare (bursaries and grants) was highly significant in covering their living costs and also making financial savings possible. These students valued being able to save money. It allowed them to make financial plans, which they saw as crucial for their short-term financial security, and to enable them to realise their post-university plans (such as postgraduate study, graduate employment schemes, etc.) in a careful and considered manner. Savings were also being used by Max and Rachika to avoid having to take on further debt to pay for postgraduate study.

Fewer were seeking non-graduate employment

Students from lower SE backgrounds at the Russell Group University were experiencing 'smoother', more traditional graduate transitions than the other sample groups (graduate employment or fulltime postgraduate study), which meant that they had security and certainty in knowing what they would be doing after graduation. For example, Yasir, Martyn and Kidjana had all secured graduate employment prior to graduation.

"The university is really helpful because I got an internship last summer with Lloyds and the university has a scheme where they provide you with funding for work experience that could be for travel or accommodation. I've now got a graduate job as a tax consultant with an accountancy firm in London." (Yasir, BA Hons)

"I've applied for quite a few graduate jobs. I've got two different offers to think about at the moment... I've worked at an NHS hostel for two years and I do Air Cadets so I've got a load of skills outside [of my degree]." (Martyn, BSc Hons)

"I've actually got a job... I'm going to be a trainee solicitor but that doesn't start [for six months], so I have some free time before January 2016. I'm going to work at Waitrose in my home town until then." (Kidjana, Law LLB)

The University's funding scheme for internships helped Yasir to build the experience needed to achieve a graduate employment position. Without this support scheme it is unlikely that Yasir would have been able to access or take up unpaid professional work experience. Elsewhere, students like Martyn were mobilising their newly acquired cultural capital, gained through extra curricula activities whilst at university, to successfully market themselves to graduate employers. Kidjana was relieved to have secured a graduate position and was going to use the six months between graduation and starting the post to earn and save money. For these students there was a tangible sense of relief and achievement in having secured graduate employment before graduation. It also indicates that the traditional, smooth graduate transition remains possible for some.

More were starting full-time postgraduate study

It is important to note that for this group of students the availability of funding through institutional postgraduate scholarship and bursary schemes was a very significant factor in their decisions to continue their studies. Both Jayden and Sangita's decisions to take up a postgraduate course was being largely driven by the opportunity to access non-debt based finance.

“I’m going to do a PGCE [teaching qualification] because I know I can get student finance. And also at [the post-1992 university in the same city] they do a bursary for PGCEs as well... They’ll pay my tuition fees and they also give me maintenance as well so I was like ‘Yay’, I can survive.” (Jayden, BA Hons)

“I want to get accepted on a Masters course given that I get funding for it. I’ve not done much research on the job market... I’ve got a lot of experience in schools... hopefully when I do a Masters course I’ll be definitely more sure of what I want to do [in the future].” (Sangita, BSc Hons)

For Sangita in particular the non-debt based funding for postgraduate study allowed the taking up of a postgraduate course to act as a drift mechanism (Bradley and Waller, 2018). Thus, the availability of funding allows her to experience ‘drift’ (usually due to a lack of clear career ambitions) with less risk. As noted by Bradley and Waller (2018), it is important to remember that ‘drifting’ does not equate with being lazy, rather it allows a slower, safer pace of transition.

The ‘losers’? Graduating students from lower and average socio-economic backgrounds at the Post-1992 University in 2015

This study found that the sample of 2015 graduands from both lower *and* average socio-economic backgrounds at the Post-1992 University appeared to be achieving less ‘successful’ graduate outcomes in the short-term. For example, none was able to save money, and many were seeking non-graduate employment and had high levels of anxiety about gaining graduate employment. In addition to the outcomes highlighted in Table 3, a high proportion of students from average socio-economic backgrounds disclosed suffering financial hardship (5/10) and were planning to move back to the family home immediately after graduation (4/10) to reduce outgoing expenditure in the short-term. The students in this sample from lower socio-economic backgrounds were eligible for non-repayable student finance on an annual basis comprising the full maintenance grant of £3387 and a modest institutional bursary (approximately £500 in their final year), as well as being able to access a repayable student loan for living costs. They also had part-time jobs and/or paid employment over the holidays and most of them lived at home whilst studying. None of the students from average socio-economic backgrounds were eligible for institutional bursaries, but some were able to access a partial maintenance grant if their parents’ combined annual income was between £25,001 and £42,620. A number of students in this group had more than one part-time job and most were living away from the family home.

Experiencing financial hardship

It was noticeable that the students from average rather than lower socio-economic backgrounds were the ones who struggled most financially. They

found that student finance did not cover their living costs (e.g. accommodation, utility bills, food, travel, study resources, leisure), which had come as a shock to most. Students from both lower and average socio-economic backgrounds felt unable to ask their families for financial support, which led to most of them taking on at least one part-time job whilst studying, often working a significant number of hours/shifts in a low-paid position. Ari had particularly struggled with covering her living costs due to choosing not to take out the student maintenance loan for religious reasons:

“I struggled financially because I’d not applied for the loan because of my religious reasons, because I didn’t want to be in more debt because of the interest... so I just had a small maintenance grant but because I’m travelling to a different city [it’s difficult].” (Ari, BSc Hons)

Ari attempted to lower her costs in other ways (e.g. living at home and commuting to university) but these outgoings were still difficult to fund without taking out a student loan.

Jamie had hoped to save money whilst studying like some of the students at the Russell Group University from lower socio-economic backgrounds, but he never managed to achieve this:

“I’ve always had money concerns... I’m not particularly great at saving. I have been meaning to put a little bit of my student loan away each time for that period when I don’t have a job and I’m not in uni and so far I’ve saved none of it.” (Jamie, BSc Hons)

It is interesting that he blames himself for not being good with money, therefore individualising the issue, rather than picking fault with the student finance system. Jamie presents his precarious financial situation after graduation as a personal failing. The implication of not being able to build up financial reserves and not being able to ask family for financial support means an imminent lack of financial security. This influences graduate decision-making for these students. Their transitions cannot be unrushed and carefully considered. Indeed, a student finance shortfall created extra pressures and strains for these students, which impacted on what they felt they could and could not do after graduation. This further highlights that the same graduate options and transitions are not open to everyone.

High levels of anxiety about entering the graduate labour market

At the Post-1992 University in 2015, 11/14 students expressed high levels of anxiety about gaining graduate employment. For example, Mark did not foresee a smooth graduate transition. He feared increased competition in the graduate labour market due to the massification of HE and a perceived lack of graduate

jobs. Mark also thought his humanities degree might disadvantage him in the labour market:

For Joanne there was a mystique surrounding entry to the graduate labour market and this lack of knowledge made her decisions feel precarious and risky. Not being able to visualise the future and being unsure as to whether she would be able to cope financially was a stressful part of her graduate transition:

“I think it’s so uncertain, like you’ve been at uni for three years and now everything’s going to change... you don’t know what’s going to happen... uni is a bit of a safe haven and then you go out, you don’t know what is going to happen, you don’t know whether you’re going to be broke.” (Joanne, BSc Hons, lower SE background)

Finally, Craig conceptualised the process of achieving a graduate job as a game. He tried to join in by being pro-active and using his initiative, but he did not know the rules of the graduate labour market game. He had not developed the required levels of social and cultural capital:

“I’ve tried to get a few work placements but, when you’re still at uni, firms try to fob you off. I’ll tell you what would be good, a module on writing personal statements and applying [for jobs] and when to apply and what’s available, because we just write a personal statement but then you don’t really know what to put in and what not to put in.” (Craig, Law LLB)

From Craig’s narrative it appeared that his HEI had not provided enough support to facilitate gaining relevant and meaningful professional work experience. A lack of access to graduate work experience and paid internships stemmed from both low levels of knowledge and an absence of opportunities.

Actively seeking non-graduate employment after graduation

10/14 students at the Post-1992 University in 2015 were seeking non-graduate employment immediately after graduation. There was a desire and perceived need for urgent financial stability and security, which was directly influencing decisions to return to the family home and apply for low-wage, non-graduate jobs. For Lawrence, gaining a regular income ends up outweighing his desire for graduate employment related to his degree subject:

“Hopefully I’ll get a job within the [web design] industry but, being realistic, that might not happen initially or it might take a while because of the current climate... I’d be happy to take a job that isn’t actually in the industry to at least get paid, obviously.” (Lawrence, BSc Hons, lower SE background)

Annie was aware of the potential trap of earning a regular wage through low paid employment. She was unsure as to whether to move out of the family home after graduation but risk becoming reliant on the money she earned at McDonalds or to forego adult independence for a few more years whilst building up savings and additional experience:

“I panic all the time, because I live at home and I’d like to move out but then I couldn’t do that on just a McDonalds’s wage. Well, I could but I feel like I’d be stuck in that job forever.” (Annie, BA Hons, lower SE background)

Dan’s dilemma was whether to develop a freelance career linked to his degree (perceived as risky and costly) or take a full-time, minimum wage job and move back home with his parents to allow him to save money for a deposit to be able to buy a house.

“I’m going back home because of personal circumstances, it has become the most viable option because of money. I need to keep my bank level up... the plan is to find my first full-time job to save up for the deposit on a house... I just need to be secure in my personal circumstances, that’s the main consideration at the moment rather than being a freelance creative kid.” (Dan, BSc Hons)

For 10/14 of these students there was a real sense of urgency and desperation as they approached graduation. Their narratives suggested that their transitions to adulthood, and potentially the graduate labour market, would be experienced as stifled and prolonged. Their priority was to keep costs low post-graduation and their strategies for achieving short-term financial security included living with parents/family and getting full-time, low wage employment.

Discussion

We found that a higher proportion of the students from lower socio-economic backgrounds at the Russell Group University in 2015 were experiencing the predictable, traditional, ‘smooth’ transitions as referred to by Roberts et al. (2016). Generous annual institutional bursaries, maintenance grants and student loans meant that they had been able to accrue financial savings whilst at university, which they were using to ward off short-term financial uncertainty and risk as they approached graduation. These savings became a protective factor that their families were unable to provide. The savings were reported to create a transition safety net that allowed the students time to think, reflect and importantly, not to panic about their next steps.

It could be argued that the Russell Group University was playing the surrogate role of an affluent, middle class, well-connected parent. Not only did its students from lower socio-economic backgrounds receive large bursaries (made

possible due to fewer students from these backgrounds attending this institution), but the institution also ran programmes and activities that directly increased these students' levels of cultural and social capital (such as paid internships with graduate employers and funded overseas networking events). Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010: 1105) suggest that 'When habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, the resulting disjunctures can generate not only change and transformation, but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty,' however, our study suggests that the Russell Group university had been successful in minimising tension and unease for its students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The investment the institution makes to increase the levels of financial, social and cultural capital of these students clearly led to positive outcomes for the individuals we interviewed. However, it is hard to ignore that such approaches are also likely to perpetuate wider social stratification in higher education.

The fact is that the same graduate opportunities and transitions are not open to everyone. However, this can often be overlooked in the literature. For example, Farenga and Quinlan (2016: 782) argue that more students are investing time and money 'into crafting a self that they can sell to employers.' Elsewhere, Jackson and Wilton (2016) argue that undergraduates need to become 'players' who engage in extracurricular activities to enhance their own employability. They suggest students need to do this to 'accrue evidence of required capabilities and to gain positional advantage' (p2). Furthermore, they suggest that skills in effective career self-management are crucial to seeking appropriate career development opportunities in relevant labour markets, highlighting the importance of meta-skills such as entrepreneurial behaviours including risk-taking, flexibility, networking and creativity. However, our research found that the impacts of the 2012 student finance system were preventing some students from demonstrating such behaviours and that others were better positioned to develop such skills and dispositions. It is not a level playing field.

As Antonucci (2016: ix) points out, some students have 'a materially disadvantaged experience of higher education' and this can be the case for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds but also 'those from intermediate backgrounds (the 'squeezed middle')'. She highlights the 'difficult paths of transition for young people lacking state and family support' (p5), which in our study applied to the students from both lower and average socio-economic backgrounds studying at the Post-1992 University.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, maintenance grants have since been abolished in England, which means that, looking ahead, institutional bursaries are likely to form an increasingly important part of the student finance landscape. However, we have seen how the Russell Group University was able

to provide a much more generous bursary to its students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Indeed their annual bursaries were five times more than the bursaries received by the students at the Post-1992 University. It is disappointing that there is still no centralised information on bursaries, meaning that students have to find out about provision for themselves. Our evidence indicates that such support, especially when the amount provided is generous, is vital, both economically and symbolically. Student support is vital to addressing the inequalities of the university experience. However, financial support is becoming increasingly individualised. We saw evidence of students blaming themselves for failing to build up savings.

Conclusion

This comparative study raises concerns about issues of equity in graduate transitions in the wake of higher university fees, higher levels of student debt and increasingly individualised financial support available for students in England. In particular, it highlights how some groups of graduates might be more disadvantaged than others under the 2012 student finance system. This disadvantage provokes coping mechanisms by some groups of graduates that are adopted to offset financial uncertainty and risk, which may lead to graduate transitions that are delayed, disrupted and individualised. Such processes will contribute to further social stratification between graduates from different socio-economic backgrounds and different types of HEI. There is an increasing need for HE stakeholders (including students, families, employers, academics and policymakers) to come together to discuss and tackle how to make graduate transitions less contingent. Indeed, it is clear that entering HE does not necessarily lead to greater social equality. Further research is needed to explore what collective responsibilities are required to move beyond stratified advantage.

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